

Alex Johnston, CEO of ConnCAN

Written Testimony

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee Public Hearing

Thursday, February 17, 2011

Chairs Senator Bye, Representative Willis, Ranking Members Senator Boucher and Representative LeGeyt and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on Raised Bills 916, 6054, and 928. My name is Alex Johnston and I am the CEO of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, or ConnCAN. We are building a movement of concerned citizens advocating to fundamentally reform our public schools through smart public policies.

I submit this testimony about these bills because we believe they represent critical steps towards the kind of reforms Connecticut needs to put students on a path to success and our state on a path to economic recovery. Meeting these goals is essential because our state has the largest achievement gap in the nation and even our top performing students have fallen behind.¹ As you well know, only one in five Connecticut students graduates from high school, and too many of those who do graduate are not prepared for college-level work.² This failure is damaging to all these kids and their families, because the jobs for high school dropouts in Connecticut just aren't there anymore. It is also hugely damaging to our state's economic prosperity: each class of dropouts costs the state \$2.4 billion in lost earnings.³ And, if Connecticut's high schools graduated all of their students ready for college, the state could save as much as \$29 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings.⁴

Raised Bill 916, An Act Concerning Remediation, and Raised Bill 6054, An Act Concerning the Tracking of Unique Identifiers by Institutions of Higher Education, speak directly to the problems mentioned above. Specifically, Raised Bill 916 will require the Department of Higher Education to study issues concerning postsecondary remedial education. Of all students who graduate from high school in Connecticut and choose to attend college at Connecticut State universities or community colleges, 65-72 percent require remedial math or English.⁵ We have already noted that the cost of remediation places an extraordinary financial burden on the state. It also damages students: research shows that many students who need remediation in college often do not graduate, in no small measure because they use up Pell Grants and other funding simply trying to catch up on material they should have mastered in high school, and run out of money before they can complete a higher degree. We can no longer afford to let this problem continue. In taking action on this Bill, I urge the committee to consider including perspectives and data

¹ Data from National Assessment for Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics and Hanushek, Petersen, and Woessmann. "U.S. Math Performance in Global Perspective."

http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG10-19_HanushekPetersonWoessmann.pdf

² Connecticut State Department of Education and http://articles.courant.com/2010-10-27/news/hc-college-readiness-gap-20101027_1_college-readiness-offer-remedial-courses-private-colleges

³ Alliance for Excellent Education.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://articles.courant.com/2010-10-27/news/hc-college-readiness-gap-20101027_1_college-readiness-offer-remedial-courses-private-colleges; Alliance for Excellent Education

from the K-12 system in the proposed study to ensure a broad look at how the whole system can be improved so that more students graduate from high school ready to take on college-level work.

I also support Raised Bill 6054 because Connecticut desperately needs better data about students' college enrollment, performance, and completion rates. This bill will require our public higher education institutions to use each student's unique student identifier so that we can monitor and track student, and by extension school and district, progress from kindergarten all the way through college graduation. Right now, our schools and districts are severely handicapped by the lack of data about students after high school graduation. Without this data, schools and districts have no way of knowing how well they are or are not doing in preparing students to meet the demands of college and the workforce. This data can help answer questions critical to improving our school system, such as:

- What percentage of each district's high school graduates enrolled in college within 15 months after graduation?
- What percentage of last year's graduates from each high school or school district needed remediation in college, and how do these percentages vary by student income and ethnicity?
- What percentage of students met the proficiency standard on the state high school test and still needed remediation in the same subject in college?
- How are students' abilities to stay in and complete college related to their high school courses, grades, and test scores?

The national Data Quality Campaign has identified the ability to match student-level P-12 and higher education data as one of its 10 essential data elements for states, and reports that 35 other states have already implemented this system.⁶ For too long, Connecticut has not had this critical policy in place.

Finally, I support Raised Bill 928, An Act Concerning Teacher Preparation. By allowing careful examination and comparison of teacher preparation programs across the state, Raised Bill 928 can help determine how better to establish standards of quality for those who aspire to teach. As I noted in ConnCAN's 2009-10 State of Connecticut Report,⁷ Connecticut's teacher preparation programs showed very mixed results on the test of elementary teachers' early reading instruction skills, with some programs showing more than 90 percent pass rate and others in which nearly 50 percent of teachers failed the test. Research is clear that if students do not learn to read by fourth grade, they rarely catch up in later grades, and will likely drop out.⁸ If we want to close our worst-in-the-nation achievement gap, we must ensure that our teachers are well prepared, especially to teach reading. I encourage the committee to pass Raised Bill 928 and to amend the bill so that the study includes an examination of student achievement on state assessments linked to teachers and teacher preparation institutions. In fact, last year the General Assembly passed Public Act 10-111, which expanded the state data system to do just that: link students to their teachers and teachers to their training programs. I am also encouraged by the Bill's intention to

⁶ Data Quality Campaign, <http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/survey/elements>

⁷ ConnCAN 2009-10 State of Connecticut Report, <http://www.conncan.org/learn/research/achievement-gap/state-connecticut-public-education-2009-2010-report-card-connecticut->

⁸ Annie E. Casey Foundation

study alternative routes to early childhood education certification because our state needs to do whatever it can to eliminate obstacles that too often dissuade our most talented and promising candidates from entering the teaching profession.

In sum, I urge the Committee to take favorable action on Raised Bills 916, 6054, and 928, which represent critical steps towards putting our students and our state on a brighter path. Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit testimony.